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China's Afghanistan Policy: The Pakistani Connection

Summary

China's policy toward Afghanistan emphasizes the need to sustain military and diplomatic pressure on the Soviet Union to withdraw its military forces. Pakistan plays a crucial role in Beijing's attempts to prevent a compromise solution that would allow Moscow's continued control over Kabul. China, however, is particularly concerned about support for this line in Pakistan, where the Chinese worry that Soviet coercion and enticements, as well as Islamabad's apparent interest in reducing tensions with Moscow, may eventually bring about political settlement short of Beijing's demands. [redacted]

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Concern and Reaction

For the Chinese, the invasion of Afghanistan typified Soviet expansionism by adding another link in the Soviet encirclement of China. It also heightened the threat to Pakistan, China's longtime ally in South Asia. Beijing moved quickly after the invasion to strengthen further relations with Islamabad. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the Office of East Asian Analysis, China, Foreign Affairs Branch with a contribution from [redacted] China, Defense Issues Branch. Questions and comments are welcome and may be directed to the author [redacted]

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 Eyewitness accounts have noted the widespread use of Chinese-manufactured arms--supplied via Pakistan--in Afghanistan. These have included a large percentage of the insurgents' heavier weapons, such as 14.5mm antiaircraft guns and 12.7mm heavy machine guns. In addition, an undetermined, but probably modest, number of Afghan rebels have reportedly undergone a range of military training inside China, involving [redacted] for some candidates, courses in battlefield medicine. [redacted]

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Encouraging Islamabad's Opposition to Moscow

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 China has not softened its approach toward the Soviet occupation, but Beijing is obviously concerned that changes in Pakistani relations with Moscow could eventually alter Islamabad's opposition to the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. Because of Pakistan's role as a conduit for aid to the rebels--and its standing as China's foothold in the region--the Chinese have tried to keep their policies parallel to those of Islamabad. Beijing has also tried to limit Moscow's room to exploit divergencies. In 1981, China reportedly expressed official concern to Islamabad over earlier Pakistani discussions with the Soviets and disappointment that Beijing was not consulted beforehand. More recently, Islamabad's talks with Moscow last year in Geneva--and the possibility--of another round of these discussions--have renewed Chinese worries about a private Pakistani accommodation. [redacted]

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 President Zia's visit to China in October 1982 apparently did not assuage Beijing's heightened apprehension. [redacted] Beijing concluded after the visit that Zia was softening his opposition to the Soviets. Moreover, Zia's [redacted] remarks in Beijing about increased Soviet subversive activities in Pakistan, the Afghan refugee situation, and frictions in US-Pakistani relations almost certainly troubled the Chinese as well. The positive atmosphere surrounding Zia's recent US visit presumably eased Chinese anxiety somewhat; although Beijing is probably still wary about tensions between Islamabad and Washington. [redacted]

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 Although [redacted] expressing understanding of Islamabad's diplomatic efforts, the Chinese reportedly told Zia in October that his government's talks with Moscow could confer legitimacy on the Babrak regime and that Beijing did not see Soviet "flexibility" on the withdrawal issue. The Chinese also warned about Moscow's expansionism and urged continued adherence to the United Nations' principles for a political settlement--withdrawal of Soviet troops, return of the refugees, and nonalignment and self-determination for Afghanistan. [redacted]

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6,10 The fact that China has reportedly given the Kampuchea issue and a reduction in Soviet troops on the Sino-Soviet borders higher priorities than Afghanistan in its own talks with Moscow underscores Beijing's skepticism that quick or significant changes could occur in the Soviet role there. Soviet actions and China's strong interest in preserving its alliance with Islamabad will determine how Beijing shapes its policy toward Afghanistan. If in the context of Sino-Soviet talks Moscow moved to resolve the issue of Afghanistan first, we believe China would be likely to support arrangements which reduced the direct Soviet threat to Pakistan and enabled the Afghan refugees to return home. Without such Soviet action, however, Pakistan's own negotiations with the Soviet Union and Islamabad's will to ward off Soviet pressure will remain determining factors in Chinese behavior. If Zia concludes a "secret" deal with Moscow, it would at a minimum cool the atmosphere of Sino-Pakistan relations. ☐

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6,11 In the absence of a settlement, we expect China to maintain the current level of its military aid to the insurgents and diplomatic pressure on the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. China issued unyielding statements during the UN debate on Afghanistan last fall, and its authoritative commentaries in recent months have denounced the Soviet presence as a "serious threat to China's security"--a charge that has been used rarely by Beijing in the last few years. To buttress Pakistan's resolve, we expect Beijing will play down to Islamabad the prospects for Sino-Soviet normalization and for flexibility by Moscow on Afghanistan. At the same time, Beijing will also continue to argue against diplomatic moves by Islamabad that could lead to improved ties with Moscow. ☐

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